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WHA Press Guidance
March 28, 2002

VENEZUELA: INTIMIDATION OF THE MEDIA

Question: Do you have any comment on recent reports that the Venezuelan Government is waging a systematic campaign against the media in Venezuela?

A: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF DEMOCRACY, AND ANY EFFORTS TO ABRIDGE OR LIMIT THAT FREEDOM THROUGH INTIMIDATION IS UNACCEPTABLE. WE HAVE EXPRESSED OUR CONCERN REGARDING PREVIOUS INCIDENCES OF INTIMIDATION, SUCH AS THE JANUARY 7 VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE CARACAS DAILY *EL NACIONAL*.

THE MEDIA HAS AN IMPORTANT RIGHT AND DUTY TO INFORM THE PUBLIC AND TO PROVIDE A FORUM FOR THE FREE EXCHANGE OF IDEAS. THE UNITED STATES AND OUR HEMISPHERIC PARTNERS, WORKING THROUGH THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES AND THE SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS, HAVE HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING THE FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE OF THE MEDIA.

Question: Are you doing anything to support Venezuelan journalists?

A: OUR EMBASSY IS CLOSELY WATCHING THE SITUATION IN VENEZUELA. WE ARE IN CONSTANT TOUCH WITH JOURNALISTS THERE, INCLUDING THOSE WHO REPORT INCIDENTS OF HARASSMENT. RESPECT FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND OTHER DEMOCRATIC NORMS IS PART OF OUR DIALOGUE WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF VENEZUELA.

[Background: "Venezuelan journalists have charge that the attacks against them have escalated from verbal assaults into an official campaign of physical harassment, leading international press groups to warn that media freedom is in serious jeopardy," the *Miami Herald* reported March 28. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission, the Miami-based Inter-American Press Association, and the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists have issued reports criticizing Venezuelan President Chávez's intimidation of the media. We do not know if this is a well-planned out campaign but there have been previous incidences of intimidation. For example, on January 7, an estimated 100 pro-Chávez supporters besieged the office of leading Caracas daily *El Nacional*. This demonstration came one day after President Chávez accused the paper of waging a propaganda war against his government, publishing lies, and exaggerating the opposition to his government. Additionally, on March 13, the official government news agency Venpres published a story on its website denouncing that Globovision TV commentator José Domingo Blanco, and Ibeyise Pacheco, editor of a tabloid newspaper, were "narcojournalists" being paid off by drug cartels to smear the Chávez government.]